

TRANSACTION No. 88

FEBRUARY, 1905

acc. 1506
906.97127

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The Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba



A REVIEW-HISTORY OF THE PASSENGER PIGEON OF MANITOBA

BY

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WINNIPEG:

MANITOBA FREE PRESS COMPANY

1905

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The following paper was prepared for and read at the annual meeting of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific society at Winnipeg on March 2, 1905, by Geo. E. Atkinson, naturalist, Portage la Prairie, a member of the society.

If we were at all inclined to doubt the fact that in nature's economy one immutable law is that the stronger shall prey upon the weaker or that despite alleged enlightenment and advanced appreciation of moral responsibility, man, who was made head of creation, has in his consideration of all other forms of life failed to rise above the animal nature of making all weaker and less resourceful creatures subservient to his dominating will, to kill at his pleasure, to enslave for his convenience or to deny the right to life for the gratification of an autocratic whim. If, I repeat, we were to doubt that these conditions were existent we would but have to peruse for a time the natural history of the world for conclusive evidence to dispell all doubt.

Yet while the biological history of any country records the decrease and disappearance of many forms of life due to just or unjust circumstances, it remains for the historical records of North America to reveal a career of human selfishness which may be con-

sidered the paragon. Within four centuries of North American civilization (or modified barbarism) we can be credited with the wiping into the past of at least three species of animal life originally so phenomenally abundant and so strikingly characteristic in themselves as to evoke the wonders and amazement of the entire world. And sad to relate, so effectual has been the extermination that it is doubtful if our descendants a few generations hence will be able to learn anything whatever about them save through the medium of books. While herein again we shall be just subjects of their censure for having manifestly failed to preserve in history's archives any material amount of specific information.

The earlier settlers landing upon the Atlantic coast between Newfoundland and the Carolinas found them in possession of armies of great auks and the few scraps of authenticated history which we now possess disclose a most iniquitous course of wanton slaughter and destruction which ended in the complete extinction of the bird over sixty years ago. Yet in the face of this destruction there remain but four mounted specimens and two eggs in the collections of North America to-day while but 70 skins remain in the collections of the entire world.

If possible more ruthless and inhuman was the carnage waged against the noble Buffalo, the countless thousands of which roaming over virgin prairies excited the wonder and amazement of the entire sporting and scientific world, and which, to-day, are represented only in zoological parks where all individuality will eventually be lost in domestication. While the greater portion of our literature dealing with them is so exaggerated and so fantastically interwoven with fiction with a view of creating author heroes that its scientific value is almost nil.

Co-incident almost with the passing of the buffalo we have to record the decline and fall of the passenger pigeon, the subject of this paper. A bird which aroused the excitement and wonder of the entire world during the first half of the last century because of its phenomenal numbers.

A bird also which stood out unique in character and individuality among the 800 described pigeons of the world and which won the admiration of every ornithologist who was fortunate enough to have experience with it living or dead. Yet withal not exempt from the oppression of its human foe who has been instrumental through interference with the breeding and feeding grounds and through a continued persecution and ruthless slaughter for the market, in reducing the species almost beyond the hope of salvation which now rests upon the possibility of a few isolated pairs unauthentically recorded, still remaining which may be able to perpetuate the species. Should these fail the species is doomed to be one of the past.

The Passenger pigeon, the species under observation, was first described under the genus *Columba* or *Type Pigeons*, but subsequently Swainson separated it from these and placed it under a genus *Ectopistes* because of the greater length of wing and tail.

Generically named *Ectopistes*—meaning moving about or wandering, and specifically named *Migratoria*, meaning migratory, we have a technical name implying not only a species migrating annually to and from their breeding ground but one given to moving about from season to season selecting the most congenial environment for both breeding and feeding.

Audubon especially remarked of this species that the food supply was a much greater factor in regulating their movements than was the temperatures and that they would appear in one district for a time and disappear from it as soon as the food supply became inadequate, and we can readily appreciate how rapidly the supply would become exhausted in the most productive districts with the

demand upon it necessary to supply the immense multitudes of the birds recorded for the first half of the last century.

It would appear that the birds followed the line of the Mississippi Valley, spreading eastward to the line of the Alleghany mountains, northward into Ontario and up the Red river Valley to the very shores of Hudson's Bay, selecting locations for nesting accommodation for colonies aggregating from thousands to millions as the food supply guaranteed. With all the knowledge we have possessed of the unestimable multitudes which existed during the early part of the last century and with their decline begun and noted generally in the later sixties and early seventies, we still find that no steps whatever were taken to prevent their possible depletion and few records of any value are made of the continuance or speed of this decrease and not until the last decade of the century do we awake to the fact that the pigeons are gone beyond the possibility of a return in any numbers. When a few years later reports are made that pigeons still exist and are again increasing scientific investigation shows that the Mourning Dove has been mistaken for the pigeon or that the Band-tailed pigeon of California is taken for the old Passenger pigeon and so we have continued since the early nineties investigating rumors of their appearance from all over America, north and south, and the West Indian Islands, but all reports point us to the past for the pigeon and some other species under suspicion.

I doubt very much if the historian desirous of compiling any historical work would find himself confronted with such a decided blank in historical records during an important period than that confronted in the compilation of a historical record of the Passenger pigeon within any district which it formerly frequented during the period from about 1870, when the decline was first noticed, to 1890, when the birds had practically passed away. In this matter Mr. J. H. Fleming, of Toronto, in writing me, says: "The pigeons seems to have gone off like dynamite. Nobody expected it and nobody had prepared a series of signs," and to this I can add that no one seems to have made any series of records of the birds from year to year. Since their disappearance, however, things have changed; everybody is alert for pigeons, and everybody has a theory, but beyond affording subject of social conversation or awakening a recital of old pigeon experiences from the old timers, these rumors and theories seem to return to the winds from whence they came.

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ECTOPISTES MIGRATORIA.
(Passenger Pigeon.)

ZENAIIDURA MACROURA.
(Mourning Dove.)

Frequently mistaken for Pigeon, showing comparative sizes.

The latest theory advanced to me by a correspondent is the possibility of some disturbance of the elements in the shape of a cyclone, or a storm striking a migrating host in crossing the Gulf of Mexico and destroying them almost completely. This is a plausible theory but I am unable to conceive how such immense hosts of pigeons as are recorded up to 1885 could possibly have met with sudden disaster in this manner even in the center of the gulf without leaving some wreckage to tell the story and such is not recorded. While again I do not think that the entire host would cross the gulf, but that a large portion of the migrating birds would take an overland route through Mexico and Central America to the southern boundary of their flight. Personally I am inclined to cherish my original contentions that the continued disturbances of the breeding and feeding grounds, both by the slaughter of the birds for market and by the dissipating of the original immense colonies by the clearing of the hardwood and pine forests of the United States and Eastern Canada compelling these sections of the main column to travel further in search of congenial environment, curtailing the breeding season and I have no doubt frequently preventing many from breeding for several seasons. While the persistent persecution and destruction for the market was in no way proportionately lessened in the vicinity of these smaller colonies as long as a sufficient number of the birds remained to make the traffic profitable. It can at once be seen that this continued drain upon these smaller colonies when other conditions were becoming more difficult for the birds to contend with would be instrumental in depleting the entire former main column to a point when netting and shooting were no longer profitable and the remnant of these colonies having to run a gauntlet of persecution over their entire course of migration to and from winter quarters and to such proceeding there could be but one result, and that the one we now face, extermination.

Of those records made during the pigeons' day, as we might call it, the earliest we have are those made by a Mr. T. Hutchins, who was a Hudson's Bay company trader operating for some 25 years in the district adjacent to Hudson's Bay, during which time he made copious notes of the birds frequenting that district, which were afterwards published by Pennant in his *Arctic Zoology* in 1785. He says in part:

"The first pigeon I shall take note of is one I received at Severn in 1771,

and having sent it home to Mr. Pennant, he informed me that it was the migratoria species. They are very numerous inland and visit our settlement in the summer. They are plentiful about Moose Factory and inland, where they breed, choosing an arborous situation. The gentlemen number them among the many delicacies the Hudson's Bay affords our tables. It is a hardy bird, continuing with us until December. In summer their food is berries, but after these are covered with snow they feed upon the juniper buds. They lay two eggs and are gregarious. About 1786 these birds migrated as high as York Factory, but remained only two days."

In a report issued 1795 Samuel Hearne also reports the birds abundant inland from the southern portion of Hudson's Bay, but states that though good eating, they are seldom fat.

The first provincial record, that made by Sir John Richardson in 1827, in which he says: A few hordes of Indians, who frequent the low floods districts at the south end of Lake Winnipeg, subsist principally on the pigeons during the period when the sturgeon fishing is unproductive, and the wild rice is still unripened, but further north the birds are too few in numbers to furnish material diet.

I presume that he means further up the Lake Winnipeg shores, since Hutchins and Hearne both reported them common nearer Hudson's Bay.

From this time until the later fifties and the early sixties no records are available for the present province of Manitoba, but it will not be out of place here, for the sake of comparison, as well as for the benefit of those of us to-day who, having heard some of the stories of our fathers and grandfathers of the phenomenal pigeon flights and rookeries, and because of not having seen, are unable to conceive of such stories being other than the fanciful yarns of a declining intellect, to record some of these seemingly incredulous and exaggerated records by those devoted to ornithological pioneers of America, Wilson and Audubon."

Alexander Wilson, the recognized father of American ornithology, begun his labors in the American field in 1794, and so assiduously did he labor herein that through neglect of himself he shattered his health and brought about a premature decline and death at the age of 47 years.

Up to the year of his death he had seen seven volumes of his illustrated *American Ornithology* published, and herein he recites his experiences with the pigeons in the states of Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky, which are worthy of reproduction here:

"The roosting places are always in the woods, and sometimes occupy a large extent of forest. When they have frequented one of these places for a while the appearance it exhibits is surprising. The ground is covered for a depth of several inches with their dung; all the tender grass and underwood destroyed; the surface strewn with large limbs of trees, broken down by the weight of the birds collecting one above another; and the trees themselves killed as completely as though girdled with an axe. The marks of their desolation remain for many years and numerous places could be pointed out several years after where scarcely a single vegetable had made its appearance. When these roosts are first discovered the inhabitants for considerable distances visit them in the night with guns, clubs, long poles, pots of sulphur, and various other engines of destruction. In a few hours they fill many sacks and load horses with them. * * *

"By the Indians a pigeon roost is considered an important source of national profit and dependence for that season, and all their active ingenuity is exercised on the occasion. * * *

"Not far from Shelbyville, in the state of Kentucky, about five years ago, there was one of these breeding places, which stretched through the woods in nearly a north and south direction, was several miles in breadth and upwards of forty miles in extent. In this tract almost every tree was filled with nests wherever the branches could accommodate them. The pigeons made their appearance about April 10th and left it altogether with their young by May 25. As soon as the young were fully grown, and before they had left the nests, numerous parties of the inhabitants from all parts of the adjacent country came with wagons, axes, beds, cooking utensils, many of them accompanied by the greater part of their families, and encamped for several days at the immense nursery. Several of them informed me that the noise was so great as to terrify their horses, and that it was difficult for one person to hear another speak without bawling in his ear. The ground was strewn with broken limbs of trees, eggs and young squab pigeons, which had been precipitated from above and upon which herds of hogs were fattening. Hawks, buzzards and eagles were sailing about in great numbers, seizing the squabs from the nests at pleasure, while from twenty feet upward to the tops of the trees, the view through the woods presented a perpetual tumult of crowding and fluttering multitudes of pigeons, their wings roaring like thunder, mingled

with the frequent crash of falling timber, for now the axemen were at work cutting down those trees which seemed to be most crowded with nests, and contriving to fell them in such a manner that they might bring down several others, by which means the falling of one tree sometimes produced 200 squabs, little inferior to the old ones in size and almost one heap of fat. On one single tree upwards of a hundred nests were found. * * * It was dangerous to walk under these fluttering millions, because of the frequent fall of large branches, broken down by the multitudes above, and which in their descent often destroyed numbers of the birds themselves."

Following upon this recital, Wilson then describes the flight of these birds to and from the feeding ground:

"The mast had been chiefly consumed in Kentucky, and the pigeons every morning a little before sunrise set out for the Indian Territory, the nearest point of which was distant about sixty miles. Many of these returned before ten o'clock, the great body generally appearing on their return shortly after noon. * * * Coming to an opening by the side of a creek where I had a more uninterrupted view, I was astonished at their appearance. They were flying with great rapidity at a height beyond gunshot, several strata deep and so close together that could shot have reached them, one discharge could not have failed to bring down several birds. From right to left, as far as the eye could reach, the breadth of this vast flock extended, seeming everywhere equally crowded. Curious to note, how long this flight would continue, I took out my watch, and sat down to observe them. It was then half-past one, and I sat for more than an hour, but instead of diminution, this prodigious procession seemed rather to increase both in numbers and rapidity, and anxious to reach Frankfort before night, I rose and went on. About four o'clock in the afternoon, I crossed Kentucky river, at the town of Frankfort, at which time the living torrent above seemed as numerous and extensive as ever. Long after this, I observed them in large bodies, that continued to pass for six or eight minutes, and these were followed by other detached bodies all moving in the same southeast direction until after six o'clock in the evening."

Following this he attempts an estimate of the numbers of this night flock:

"If we suppose this column to have been one mile in breadth (I believe it was much more), and that it moved at the rate of one mile a minute for four hours, the time it continued passing, would make the whole length 240

miles. Again, supposing that each square yard comprehended three pigeons, the square yards of the whole space, multiplied by three, would give 2,230,272,000 pigeons, an inconceivable multitude, but probably far below the actual numbers. Computing each to consume a half pint daily, the whole quantity would equal 17,424,000 bushels a day."

The rate of flight here estimated (60 miles per hour) is much less than the regulation pigeon flight, which usually exceeded 100 miles an hour.

The latter statement of the amount of food necessary to supply this phenomenal aggregation supports my contention that failure of food supply was a chief factor in their final decrease.

Audubon, in his "American Ornithological Biography," added many new facts to Wilson's notes, among which we might note some habits of flight and feeding.

"It is extremely interesting to see flock after flock performing exactly the same evolutions in the air as those performed by a preceding flock. Thus should a hawk have charged on a group at a certain spot, the angles, curves and undulations described by the birds in their efforts to escape the dreaded talons of the plunderers, are undeviatingly followed by the following group."

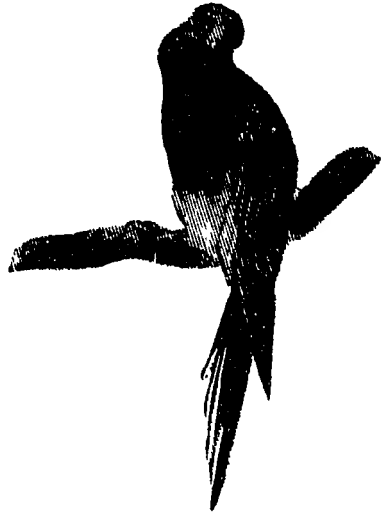
After describing the caution of the birds in lighting at a feeding ground, he says:

"Hunger soon brings them to the ground. When alighted they are seen industriously throwing up the withered leaves in their quest for fallen mast. The rear ranks continually rising, passing over the main body and alighting in front in such rapid succession that the whole flock seem still on the wing. The quantity of ground swept is astonishing, and so completely has it been cleared, that the gleaner who might follow in their rear would find his labor completely lost."

This remarkable flight character can be best explained in that the marvellous unanimity of action on the part of these millions of birds in one or many flocks for many generations had brought them to an intellectual condition, if we may use the term, in which every individual of a flock and every flock of a flight unconsciously and almost involuntarily acted as a part of an immense machine guided by a single mind or thought, while I am of opinion that it was this very automatic condition which became the birds' worst enemy, since with change of conditions the bird was without resources, and as a machine with a fouled belt it became its own destroyer.

The early records of the birds in Eastern Canada in later years corro-

borate the statements of Wilson and Audubon in almost every particular, and one acquainted with the timbered conditions of the country to the immediate west of the Red River valley and north of the American boundary line, can readily appreciate the utter inadequacy of an acceptable food supply for these countless millions of pigeons, and we can also readily understand how very soon the breaking



ECTOPISTES MIGRATORIA.

(From a drawing by Wilson about 1800, where characteristic wing and tail length is shown.)

up of the original hardwood forests of Eastern Canada would tend to decrease the visible food supply and cause these hungry millions to seek new pastures.

The breaking of these feeding grounds would first be instrumental in scattering or breaking up the largest flocks, and even the very long distances the bird was able to fly from breeding to feeding ground would be exceeded, necessitating next the nesting in smaller colonies, where careless nesting habits with continued changing conditions would tend to continue the decline of their numbers, while the tenacity with which even the smaller roosts were clung to by man like leeches to a frog, and the hapless victims shot, netted and stolen from the nest before maturity, was but another effectual and not the least responsible agent in the relegation of the pigeon to that past from which none return.

When I decided to attempt the preparation of a review history of the pigeon in Manitoba, I felt that having had practically no experience with the bird myself I should have to depend upon the reports of representative pioneers of the country for my facts as to the numbers of the birds formerly found here, and the period of their decline and disappearance. I accordingly drafted a series of questions which I submitted to these gentlemen, and I have to tender them all my sincere thanks, as well as that of the scientific world, for the ready responses and the conciseness of the information received.

I shall here quote from the replies received.

One of the earliest residents I find is Mr. Geo. A. Garrioch, of Portage la Prairie, who says:

"I was born in Manitoba, and came to Portage la Prairie about 1853. I was then only about six years old, and do not remember very much about the pigeons at that time, but as long as I can remember they were very numerous.

"They passed over every spring, usually during the mornings, in very large flocks, following each other in rapid succession.

"I do not think they bred in any numbers in the province, as I only remember seeing one nest; this contained two eggs.

"The birds to my recollection were most numerous in the fifties, and the decline was noticed in the later sixties and continued until the early eighties, when they had disappeared. I have observed none since until last year when I am positive I saw a single male bird south of the town of Portage la Prairie."

Mr. Angus Sutherland, of Winnipeg, in reply to my interrogation, states: "I was born in the present city of Winnipeg and have lived here for over fifty years. The wild pigeons were very numerous as far back as I can remember. They frequented the mixed woods about the city, and while undoubtedly many birds bred here, I remember no extensive breeding colonies in the province, and believe the great majority passed farther north to breed. About 1870 the decrease in their numbers was most pronouncedly manifest, this decline continuing until the early eighties, when they had apparently all disappeared, and I have seen only occasional birds since, and none of late years.

Mr. W. J. McLean, formerly of the Hudson's Bay company, and, at present resident in Winnipeg, sends me some valuable information which sup-

ports my contention regarding the influence of food supply. He states:

"I came to the Red River Settlement in 1860 and found the pigeons very numerous on my arrival and that they had been equally numerous for some years previous. The birds came in many thousands and great numbers of them bred in the northeastern portion of the province through the district north of the Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake, where the cranberry and blueberry are abundant, and these fruits constitute their chief food supply as they remain on the bushes and retain much of their food properties until well on into the summer following their growth. They also feed largely on acorns wherever they abound. The first decline I noticed was about the early seventies and 1877 was the last occasion on which I saw any numbers of the birds, when I encountered large flocks of them passing northwesterly from White Sand river near Fort Pelly. This was on a dull drizzling day about the middle of May, and I presume they were then heading toward the Barren grounds district, where the blueberry and cranberry are again very abundant."

Mr. E. H. G. G. Hay, formerly police magistrate of Portage la Prairie, now of St. Andrew's, reports: I came to the country in June, 1861, and found that the pigeons were abundant previous to my arrival. To give you an idea of their numbers a Mr. Thompson, of St. Andrew's, some mornings caught with a net about 10 feet square as many as eighty dozen, and in the spring of 1864 I fired into a flock as they rose from the ground and picked up seventeen birds.

"The birds were mostly migratory in what is now known as Manitoba and mostly all would go further north after the seeding season, and I never heard of any extensive rookeries such as one recorded for the east and south. The few that bred here frequented mixed poplar and spruce. They seemed most numerous in the sixties and began to show signs of decreasing about 1869 or '70 and by 1875 they had all disappeared and I have only seen an occasional bird since."

Mr. Wm. Clark, of the Hudson's Bay company, Winnipeg, informs me:

"The first place I remember having seen pigeons in Manitoba was at White Horse plains (St. Francois Xavier) in 1865, where they were very numerous, many of them breeding in the oak trees in that district.

Two years after this I went to Oak Point on Lake Manitoba, but do not remember the birds there nor since."

Mr. Charles A. Boultsbee, of Macgregor, Man., replies as follows:

I have resided in Manitoba since 1872 and have taken pigeons as far north as Fort Pelly in the fall of 1874, but know nothing of them previously. In our district they usually made their appearance in the fall and fed upon the grain. I never found them nor did I ever hear of them breeding in the province in any numbers.

"They continued fairly numerous until about 1882, at which time we had to drive them from the grain stacks, but they then disappeared and only stragglers have been noted since."

"None of the flocks noted in Manitoba in any way approached those recorded for the east and south for numbers."

There is no doubt that many other reports could have been secured, but as all seem to tend toward the one conclusion, I shall save time and space by summarizing that information at hand.

Some months ago I made a statement in an article written for local interest to the effect that Manitoba never was the home of the wild pigeon. By this I meant that because of unfavorable breeding and feeding conditions within the province, only the smallest percentage of the enormous flocks recorded for the south and east could possibly exist here. The records here collected support me in this contention so far as that portion of the province west of the Red River is concerned, but the record of Sir John Richardson tends to show that favorable conditions must have existed immediately south of Lake Winnipeg, through what he calls a low lying district, and where we can assume the cranberry and blueberry were abundant, as they were through the district subsequently reported by Mr. McLean to the east and north-east of this district. There is no doubt that the difference in the character of the country east of the Red River from that of the west would present more favorable conditions for the birds, but with all it has not in one case been shown that the birds nested in colonies approaching the size of the famous eastern and southern roosts, and reports seem rather to show that those which bred within the province were more generally scattered over the country, at the same time being numerous enough to guarantee the shooter and the netter to pursue a profitable traffic in the birds. All evidence seems to show that large numbers passed through the province to and from a northern breeding

ground, possibly that recorded by Hutchens near Hudson Bay and westward, and that they were excessively numerous up to about 1870, when they began to decrease. This decline continued until the middle eighties, when they were practically all gone, and with the exception of a few stragglers none have been seen since while as to the latest authenticated records, I quote from notes in my former pamphlet on "Rare Bird Records":

"The beautiful specimen I have been able to secure for illustration herewith is loaned me by Mr. Dan Smith, of Winnipeg, who shot it in St. Boniface, south-east of the cathedral, in the fall of 1893, and so far as I have been able to discover is the last authentic record for the vicinity of Winnipeg, while the only specimen I was ever privileged to handle in the flesh in Manitoba was collected at Winnipegosis on April 10, 1890, and sent me to be mounted. It was a male specimen in the pink of condition in every way. No other specimen was noted with it, and no authentic records have been made in Manitoba since then." I have since that time expended much effort in following up rumors of the bird's presence in various districts with a view to locating a breeding pair. Not alone have my desires been to secure and preserve a skin or mounted specimen, but with the possibility of locating a breeding bird and securing the bird alive or securing the eggs while fresh to assist in the salvation of the pigeon in a partially domesticated state, since the only specimens now living in captivity are those owned by Prof. Whitman, of the University of Chicago, who, in writing me, says: "My stock seems to have come to a complete standstill, having raised no young for the last four years. The weakness is due to long inbreeding, as my birds are from a single pair captured about 25 years ago in Wisconsin. I have long tried to secure new stock, but have been unsuccessful. A single pair would enable me to save them, for they breed well in confinement."

"I have crossed them with ring-doves, and still have three hybrids but as these are infertile there is no hope of even preserving these half-breeds alive. Of all the wild pigeons in the world the passenger pigeon is my favorite. No other pigeon combines so many fine qualities in form, color, strength and perfection of wing power."

I am enabled, through the kindness of Prof. Whitman, to exhibit a photograph of one of his younger birds taken in this aviary at Chicago.